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War by Other Means

THE SHADOW WARRIORS
O. S. S. and the Origins of the C. I. A.
By Bradley F. Smith.
507 pp. New York:
Basic Books. $20.75.

By PHILIP TAUBMAN

THERE is something serendipitous about the recent spate of books about William J. "Wild Bill" Donovan, the World War I hero who became Washington's spy master during World War II and laid the foundations for the Central Intelligence Agency. It is not that the books reduce the Donovan legend to more human dimensions, although that was long overdue and "The Shadow Warriors" performs the historical refinement without disrespect for Donovan's accomplishments. Nor is it some new insight into how the Office of Strategic Services, which Donovan created and directed, made the Government more receptive to the establishment of a centralized intelligence organization, though that too is amply explained in Bradley F. Smith's book. The unexpected dividend is the pertinence of the story to current foreign policy and intelligence issues, particularly the Reagan Administration's extensive use of covert activities as an instrument of foreign policy.

Mr. Smith, who teaches history at Cabrillo College in California, has done an exhaustive job of research on the O.S.S. and Donovan. If anything, he may have stuffed too much detail into his book. In some sections, the story slows to a crawl with reconstructions of bureaucratic battles that could interest only an O.S.S. veteran. In other places, he adopts the kind of forced prose that one associates with a doctoral thesis. But these flaws may be forgiven because the book offers an honest, lively portrait of an important American and the contributions, good and bad, that he and the O.S.S. made to the American intelligence system.

William Donovan, if not the father of United States covert operations, surely was their patron saint. He was an indefatigable promoter of clandestine efforts to influence the internal affairs of other nations. During World War II, he produced a blizzard of such proposals, some brilliant, some harebrained. The use of O.S.S. agents to help coordinate the sabotage activities of the French resistance with Allied forces during and after the invasion of Normandy was successful, and Allen Dulles, the O.S.S. chief in Switzerland who later became the director of the C.I.A., used Bern as a base of operations to support resistance groups in France and Italy. But for every success there was a failure or a seriously flawed plan. In March 1942, for example, Donovan proposed to President Roosevelt that Otto von Hapsburg, the pretender to the Austrian imperial throne, be received at the White House and asked to contact possible pro-Allied groups in Hungary. The only problem, as Mr. Smith points out, was that "the Hapsburgs were anathema to the Czechs and Yugoslavs as well as to the Soviets." The plan was promptly abandoned.

In the end, Donovan and the O.S.S. made covert operations into a respectable and respected form of intelligence activity. As Mr. Smith writes, "It seems obvious that O.S.S. was more influential in its impact on people's ideas and imagination than in its practical wartime achievements." And he concludes, "Whether myth or not, the O.S.S. claim to independent shadow warfare prowess strengthened Washington's belief that it could retain superpower status cheaply and helped lead the United States into making its central intelligence agency into something that it hoped could produce shadow warfare magic."

William J. Casey, the current director of Central Intelligence, is a Donovan disciple. He worked for Donovan in the O.S.S., supervising American agents who operated behind German lines, and has long been a leading member of the Veterans of Strategic Service, a group that has celebrated the achievements of Donovan and supported American intelligence activities. But, as "The Shadow Warriors" makes clear, more than shared experience links the two men. Under Mr. Casey's direction, the Central Intelligence Agency has set in motion a series of covert operations in Central America that would probably make Donovan proud.

> "Donovan and the O. S. S. made covert operations respectable."

The advocates of these efforts, involving Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, take a page from Donovan's script when they argue that covert operations are the ideal way to protect American interests in areas where diplomacy has failed and overt military action is too risky.

There are also disquieting parallels between the original justifications for shadow warfare offered by Donovan and the explanations given by current officials for the use of covert actions against Nicaragua. Mr. Smith reports that an early Donovan work about Nazi subversive activities in the United States, "Fifth Column Lessons for America," grossly exaggerated the threat in an effort to shake the American public out of its isolationist complacency. While no one has suggested that the Reagan Administration's descriptions of Soviet and Cuban interference in Central America are fraudulent, critics have accused the Administration of selectively disclosing intelligence information favorable to its policy.